

ISLAM AND KNOWLEDGE

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THE
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AL-MUTAWWA LECTURE

given at
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for the
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ISLAM
AND
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by
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PREFACE

In 1987 the Trustees of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies initiated an annual lecture at Oxford in honour of Shaikh Abdul Aziz Al-Ali Al-Mutawwa. Shaikh Abdul Aziz has won widespread respect and admiration by his scholarly interest in and contribution to Quranic Studies and by his generous support of religious, educational and humanitarian causes in many countries. It is to be hoped that the Al-Mutawwa lectures will contribute to the promotion of a better understanding of Islam.

It is very fitting and a great honour that the first Al-Mutawwa lecture should be given by the founding Chairman of the Trustees of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, Maulana Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi. Maulana Abul Hasan's outstanding contribution to the study of Islam has won global attention and respect and his many publications, in a variety of languages, are a tribute to his dedication and industry. A recipient of the King Faisal Prize for Service to Islam, Maulana Abul Hasan has served with distinction on numerous national and international educational institutions. He has long presided as Rector of Nadwat ul-Ulama and most recently provided the inspiration for the establishment of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. As founder Chairman of the Centre he has guided its development from the outset and remains a source of constant encouragement and valued advice.

This first Al-Mutawwa lecture was delivered at St. Cross College, Oxford, on the 29 August 1987. It is entirely appropriate, both for Oxford and for the contemporary Islamic world, that the subject of this inaugural lecture should be concerned with Islam and knowledge. Central to the purpose of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies is the firm belief that encouragement of the highest standards of intellectual enquiry and academic endeavour will provide new opportunities for a more informed understanding of Islamic religious beliefs, social and moral values, and cultural traditions. In doing so the Centre seeks to contribute to and to benefit from the long academic traditions of Oxford University which has given such a warm welcome to the new Centre. In our Chairman's words, it must be the hope of all that 'the Centre's search for truth and pursuit of knowledge will lay the foundation for cooperation and harmony between different peoples.'

F. A. Nizami
Director, Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies

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Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

If there was any single individual who could truly be called the moulder of the course of human history, who gave man knowledge in place of ignorance, reason in place of custom and tradition, freedom of thought in place of blind following in the place of forefathers, he was Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Prophet Muhammad stood at a cross-roads of history, separating a non-rational from a rational period of human life. His teachings brought man into the world of reason and stimulated his critical faculty.

The very first revelation to the Holy Prophet demonstrates the fact that the Lord of the universe has done a great favour to mankind by bestowing knowledge on it from His presence. This initial revelation also mentions one of the greatest means of acquiring and transmitting knowledge from one individual to another, from an earlier generation to the succeeding one. The pen has always been the most widespread means for diffusion of learning since it is through it that knowledge has passed on in time and space, from one nation to another as well as from the past to the present. It is through the pen that all literary creations and libraries have come into existence.

In so far as the circumstances of this remarkable revelation are concerned, it is amazing that 'knowledge' should have been mentioned in the first revelation. It was addressed to an unlettered Apostle amongst a people who were backward by any standard. The pen must have been a rare commodity among this people who took pride in their illiteracy. In fact, they were known as '*ummiyin*' or the illiterates. The Qur'an itself alludes to the situation then obtaining in Arabia in these words:

'It is he who has raised amidst the unlettered people an apostle from among them, to recite his revelations to them and to purify them, and to teach them the Book and the wisdom, though before that they were in manifest error'.¹

The Qur'an cites what the Jews of Madina used to say about their neighbours, the Arabs: 'We are not bound to keep our faith with the illiterates'.²

¹ Qur'an 62.2 (Quotations used are based on the Dawood (1983), Arberry (1983) and Abdul Majid (1985) translations.)

² Qur'an 3.75

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It was to these people, the nation of illiterates, that the last Prophet was sent and was told that:

'In this manner We have revealed unto thee a spirit of Our command: thou knewest not what the Book was, nor what the faith. Yet we have made it a light wherewith We guide whomsoever We will of Our bondmen. And verily thou guidest to a straight path.'³

At another place the Prophet was reminded:

'Never have you read a book before this, nor have you ever transcribed one with your right hand, for then might those have doubted, who follow falsehood.'

AN UNEXPECTED THING

The first revelation was a remarkable event: it was the first contact between Earth and Heaven since, six hundred years earlier, Jesus Christ had preached the Gospel to the world. The initial verses of the Qur'an did not command obedience to God nor His glorification, nor attainment of His nearness, nor even rejection of idolatry or the rites and customs of paganism. These were left for later occasions and the Holy Prophet was just told to:

'Read: In the name of your Lord who created, created man from a clot of blood.'

Read: Your Lord is the most Bounteous, who has taught the use of the pen; has taught man that which he did not know.⁴

This was an event of immense significance which had an important bearing on the life of humanity. It was the beginning of an era which saw the most unprecedented and concerted efforts being made for the promotion of learning. It was the era in which Faith and Knowledge joined hands to create a new civilization. It was an age of Faith as well as of Reason.

The command to read and acquire knowledge was to be executed under the guidance of a divine messenger and in the name of the Lord so that man proceeded ahead in his journey in the light of God's knowledge and the certitude of faith. The reference to the creation of man from a clot of blood was meant to point out that man should not exceed his limits, nor feel exultant on capturing the forces of nature, since this was to come about with the acquisition of knowledge.

The pen was honoured by being mentioned in the revelation since it has always been the most important tool of learning. However, little of its significance or use was known to the Arabs at that time. The few men versed in the arts of reading and writing were known as '*al-kātib*'⁵ or the

³ Qur'an 42.52

⁴ Qur'an 29.48

⁵ Qur'an 96: 1-5.

⁶ Only 17 persons among the Quraysh are reported to have been literate, able to read and write, at that time. (*Buladhāri, Futiūh Buldān*, iv, 242, ed. de Goeje, Leiden, 1866). Some historians have given a few more names, yet their number was very small.

'the writers'. Thereafter the revelation referred to the teaching of man by saying: 'God taught man that which he did not know'—for God is the ultimate source of all knowledge which could enable man to know what is unknown. All the discoveries made in any field have come from this ability of man to learn and extend the horizon of his knowledge.

This was the starting point of the revelation to the Prophet of Islam, which had a deep impact on the subsequent course of attaining knowledge, preaching God's message and changing modes of thought. It made knowledge a fellow and ally of religion that could always help man in solving new social and cultural problems. Religion, on the other hand, was thereafter never frightened or timid in the face of knowledge.

QURANIC CONTEMPLATION

The Qur'an speaks of the different sources of information as well as the things that need to be studied to acquire knowledge. It invites attention, in this connection, towards living beings and the cosmos and the historic events of past nations (referred to by the Qur'an as *ayyām Allāh* and *Sunnat-ul-Allāh*, and known to us as history) so that man may ponder over them and draw useful conclusions and lessons from them.

Dr. Sir Mohammad Iqbal, who has discussed the interrelationship between human intellect and the sources of knowledge, describes thus the change brought about by Islam to earlier views:

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'But inner experience is only one source of human knowledge. According to the Qur'an there are two other sources of knowledge—Nature and History; it is in tapping these sources of knowledge that the spirit of Islam is seen at its best. The Qur'an sees signs of the ultimate reality in the 'sun', the 'moon', and 'lengthening of shadows', 'alternation of day and night', the 'variety of human colour and tongue', the 'alternation of the days of success and reverse among peoples', in fact, in the whole of nature as revealed to the sense-perception of man. And the Muslim's duty is to reflect on these signs and not to pass by them 'as if he is deaf and blind', for 'who does not see these signs in this life will remain blind to the realities of life to come'. This appeal to the concrete, combined with the slow realisation that, according to the teachings of the Qur'an, the universe is dynamic in its origin, finite and capable of increase, eventually brought Muslim thinkers into conflict with Greek thought which, in the beginning of their intellectual career they had studied with so much enthusiasm. Not realising that the spirit of the Qur'an was essentially anti-classical, and putting all confidence in Greek thinkers, their first impulse was to understand the Qur'an in the light of Greek philosophy. In view of the concrete spirit of the Qur'an, and speculative nature of Greek philosophy which enjoyed theory and was neglectful of fact, this attempt was foredoomed to failure. And it is what follows this failure that brings out the real spirit and culture of Islam,

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and lays the foundation of modern culture in some of its most important aspects.⁷

Iqbal also says:

'History or, in the language of the Qur'an, 'the days of God', is the third source of human knowledge according to the Qur'an. It is one of the most essential teachings of the Qur'an that nations are collectively judged, and suffer for their misdeeds here and now. In order to establish this proposition the Qur'an constantly cites historical instances, and urges upon the reader to reflect on the past and present experience of mankind.'

'Of old did We send Moses with Our signs: and said to him 'Bring forth thy people from the darkness into the light, *and remind them of the days of God.*' Verily in this are signs for every patient, grateful person.' (14.5)

'And among those whom We had created are a people who guide others with truth, and in accordance therewith *act justly. But as for those who treat Our signs as lies, We gradually bring them down by means of which they know not; and I lengthen their days, verily, My Stratagem is effectual*' (7.181)

'Already, before your time, have *precedents been made. Traverse the Earth then, and see what hath been the end of those who falsify the signs of God.*' (3.131)

'If a wound hath befallen you, a wound like it hath already befallen others; *We alternate the days of success and reverses among peoples.*' (3.134)

'Every nation hath its fixed period.' (7.32)

The last verse is an instance of a more specific historical generalization which, in its epigrammatic formulation, suggests the possibility of a scientific treatment of the life of human societies regarded as organisms. It is, therefore, a gross error to think that the Qur'an has no germs of an historical doctrine. The truth is that the whole spirit of the Prolegomena of Ibn Khaldūn appears to have been mainly due to the inspiration which the author must have received from the Qur'an. Even in his judgements of character he is, in no small measure, indebted to the Qur'an. An instance in point in his long paragraph devoted to an estimate of the character of the Arabs as a people. The whole paragraph is a mere amplification of the following verses of the Qur'an:

'The Arabs of the desert are most stout in unbelief and dissimulation; and likelier it is that they should be unaware of the laws which God hath sent down to His Apostle; and God is knowing, wise. 'Of the Arabs of the desert there are some who reckon what they expend in the cause of God as tribute, and wait for some change to befall you;

⁷ Sir Mohammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore, 1944) pp. 127-28.

a change for evil shall befall them. God is the Hearer, the Knower.'
(9.98-99)⁸

INTEGRATION OF KNOWLEDGE

The contribution of Islam in integrating different disciplines of learning and guiding them to play a more positive, constructive role for the service of humanity, was even more significant than extending the frontiers of knowledge and creating a zest for its cultivation.

Before the rise of Islam, the chain of knowledge was disjointed, dispersed; findings of various branches of knowledge were very often conflicting and contradictory. Philosophy and physics were at odds with religion. Even the objective sciences like mathematics and medicine at times led to negative and atheistic conclusions. The Greek philosophers of antiquity, who remained pioneers of philosophy and mathematics for several centuries, were either pagan or atheist with the result that the knowledge of the Greeks and their way of thought were deemed dangerous by the revealed religions. Islam as the religion of Unity forged a link between all branches of knowledge in order to unite them in a common accord. This achievement of Islam was made possible since it had made the right beginning. It took its first lesson from READ IN THE NAME OF THE LORD WHO CREATED, which means placing full reliance on God. Often the right beginning of a thing is a guarantee for its right conclusion. Islam thus discovered a unity with the help of the Qur'an and faith in God, which integrated all the units. This unity constituted the true knowledge of God as promised to the believers.

'And (who) reflect upon the creation of the heavens and the earth; our Lord, thou hast not created this in vain. Glory be to Thee! Guard us against the chastisement.'⁹

The phenomena of nature often appear to man as capricious and contradictory; they make him anxious and astonished; sometimes they lead man to deny the existence of any Creator whom he could hold responsible for the sufferings caused by natural calamities. But the Islamic approach to knowledge guided by the Qur'an and belief in God, solved these contradictions by pointing to the 'Will' of God as the sole author of all happenings and events. A German philosopher-historian, Herold Hoffding, has described the effective role played by the Unity of Cause in giving a new thrust to the advancement of knowledge in his *History of Modern Philosophy* in these words:

The theology of a monotheistic religion is based on the fundamental thought that there is one single cause of all things. Apart from the grave difficulties which this thought involves, it has the important and valuable

⁸ M. Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, pp. 138-39.

⁹ Qur'an 3:191.

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effect of accustoming men to abstract from differences and details and of preparing them for the acceptance of an interconnecting link of all things according the law. The Unity of Cause must lead to the unity of the law. The middle ages educated man to this thought, to which the natural man overpowered by the manifoldness of phenomena and inclined to polytheism, does not feel himself drawn.¹⁰

The Qur'an changed the way of human thought by emphasising the Unity of Cause; it prompted man to strive to reduce varied phenomena to a single principle. It incessantly called the attention of its readers to the splendid marvels, the mysterious phenomenon of the universe and the unitary principle governing it. This was indeed a revolutionary concept which had a far-reaching impact on the development of knowledge. I will cite here an orientalist, not very sympathetic to Islam, who had to acknowledge this gift of Islam. In his Introduction to the translation of the Qur'an by J. M. Rodwell, Rev. G. Margoliouth states:

'The Qur'an admittedly occupies an important position among the great books of the world. Though the youngest of the epoch-making works belonging to this class of literature, it yields hardly to any in the wonderful effect which it produced on large masses of men. It has created an all but new phase of human thought and a fresh type of character.'¹¹

The force of this current of Qur'anic thought can be seen by the variety of forms in which it has found expression. Its achievements in the domain of knowledge have been acknowledged by several other western scholars also. Hartwig Hirschfeld writes in the *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qur'an*:

'We must not be surprised to find the Qur'an the fountainhead of sciences. Every subject connected with heaven or earth, human life, commerce and various trades are occasionally touched upon, and this gave rise to the production of numerous monographs forming commentaries on parts of the holy book. In this way the Qur'an was responsible for great discussions, and to it was indirectly due the marvellous development of all branches of science in the Muslim world . . . This again not only affected the Arabs, but also induced Jewish philosophers to treat metaphysical and religious questions after Arab methods. Finally, the way in which Christian scholasticism was fertilized by Arabian theosophy need not be further discussed.'

Spiritual activity once aroused within Islamic bounds was not confined to theological speculations alone. Acquaintance with the philosophical, astronomical and medical writings of the Greeks led to the pursuance of these studies. In the descriptive revelations Muhammad repeatedly calls attention to the movement of the heavenly bodies, as

¹⁰ Herold Hoffding, *History of Modern Philosophy* (London, 1922) p. 5.

¹¹ Introduction to *The Kuran* by J. M. Rodwell (London, 1918).

parts of the miracles of Allah, forced in the service of man and therefore not to be worshipped. How successfully Moslem people of all races pursued the study of astronomy is shown by the fact that for centuries they were its principal supporters. Even now many Arabic names of stars and technical terms are in use. Medieval astronomers in Europe were pupils of the Arabs . . . In the same manner the Qur'an gave an impetus to medical studies and recommended contemplation and study of Nature in general.¹²

Rober Briffault has also reached the same conclusion, for he says:

'There is not a single aspect of European growth in which the decisive influence of Islamic civilization is not traceable.'¹³

He further writes:

'It was not science only which brought Europe back to life. Other and manifold influences from the civilization of Islam communicated its first glow to European life.'¹⁴

It is sometimes claimed that the Renaissance of Europe owes everything to the revival of Greek thought. The renowned historian H. G. Wells, however, asserts that the modern world received the gifts of light and power from Islam:

' . . . From a new angle and with a fresh vigour it (the Arab mind) took up that systematic development of positive knowledge which the Greeks had begun and relinquished. If the Greek was the father, then the Arab was foster-father of the scientific method of dealing with reality, that is to say, by absolute frankness, the utmost simplicity of statement and explanation, exact record and exhaustive criticism. Through the Arab it was and not by the Latin route that the modern world received that gift of light and power.'¹⁵

My own studies lead me to the conclusion that the Muslims did not merely attain political and intellectual supremacy and found extensive and large empires, but they also surpassed at one time, all other nations in the field of knowledge and intellectual endeavour. Muslims, as a whole, have been giving birth to men of learning who have been known for their zest for acquiring knowledge, self-sacrifice for its cause and masterly dissertations of the highest quality on different subjects. Leaving aside the great jurists and traditionists of early Islam, whose peers cannot be found in any other nation of the world, Muslims have given birth to a galaxy of illustrious scholars, thinkers and writers in different branches of religious and secular sciences who can hold their own in comparison to the tallest men of learning among other people.

Muslim scholars have never limited their studies to religious sciences like *tafsīr* (exegesis), *hadīth* (traditions), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *usul al-fiqh*

¹² Hartwig Hirschfeld, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qur'an* (London, 1902) p. 9.

¹³ Robert Briffault, *Making of Humanity* (London, 1919) p. 190.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 202.

¹⁵ H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History* (London, 1920) p. 273.

(principles of legal system), comparative religions and rationale of religious canons, but also studied chemistry, physics, botany, mathematics, medicine, geography, philosophy of history, religion and culture and different philosophical systems. Some of these scholars have guided the world in arts and sciences for several centuries and left an indelible mark on the world of knowledge. To name only a few by way of illustration, there was al-Khawārizmī (d.236/850) who was the first to produce a global geography and then Abu al-Qasim Abdullah ibn Khurdadhbih (d.300/912) who gave a full map and description of the main trade routes of the Muslim world in his *al Masālik wal Mamālik*. Arab geography found its apogee in the work of al-Sharif al-Idrisi (d.562/1166) who was invited by Roger II the Norman King of Sicily, to produce an up-to-date world map. Ibn al-Haytham (d.431/1039) wrote some 200 books, 47 of which were in mathematics, 58 in engineering. He was the first to suggest the construction of an Aswan Dam and he also made valuable discoveries in the realm of optics. His book *Al-Manāzir* (the visual world) laid down a new theory of visual perception, based on the eye's absorption of light rays issuing from an object. Muhammad ibn Mūsā al-Khawārizmī (d.236/850) was the mathematician who introduced the system of symbols representing the nine numbers and invented *sifar* or zero to represent the absence of any. He was also the first to express the numerical value of digital position. It was also Al-Khawārizmī who invented *al-jabr* or algebra. Al-Battānī, the Albategni or Albateneus (d.317/929) of the European medieval authors, was one of the greatest Arab astronomers who determined with great accuracy the obliquity of the ecliptic, the length of the solar year and of the seasons and the true and mean orbit of the sun; he definitely exploded the Ptolemaic dogma of the immobility of the solar apogee. Abū Bakr Muhammad al-Rāzī (d.311/932), known as Rhazes to the West, was a celebrated alchemist and philosopher and was considered also to be the greatest physician of the world in the Middle Ages. His crowning work was *Kitab al-Hāwī*, the 'Comprehensive Book' in which he surveyed Greek, Syrian, the early Arabic and Indian medical knowledge.

Ibn al-Baytār (d.646/1248) was the great vegetal pharmacologist of his time. In two of his great works, named *Al-Mughni fi al-Adwiyah* and *Al-Jām'i li mufradāt al Adwiya wal-Aghdiya* he gave approximate symptoms of each illness and listed in alphabetical order some 1,400 animals, vegetables and minerals basing these on his own observation and over 150 authorities. The great scholar Abū 'Alī Ibn Sīnā, known in the West as Avicenna (d.428/1037) wrote *Al-Najat al Shifa* in philosophy, *Al-Qūnūn fi al-Tib* in medicine and *Ahwāl al-Nafs* in psychology. He followed the encyclopaedic conception of knowledge. As many as 231 authentic works and 110 books supposed to have been written by Ibn Sīnā have so far been unearthed by scholars. The excellence of his work in medicine gave it undisputed world authority during the five hundred years from its publication until the end of the seventeenth century. Another outstanding

scholar, Ibn Khaldūn (d.808/1406), was one of the first social scientists to make a search for the laws governing society. He anticipated Comte by centuries. The world of knowledge also remains indebted to Abū Rahyān al-Birūnī (d.440/1048). He was a versatile scholar who had equal facility in physics, metaphysics, pharmacology and chemistry, geography and history. His scientific method taken together with such other Muslim scholars as Ibn al-Haytham (d.431/1038), laid down the foundations of modern science.

THE ORIGIN OF KNOWLEDGE

Before concluding my talk, I would like to draw your attention to the fundamental truth that we never ought to forget: that man is the vicegerent of God. Man is, by himself, not the origin or fountainhead of knowledge. He is simply the deputy or agent to actualize the Will of God on this earth. The most tragic and dangerous turn in the history of knowledge, or rather that of humanity, occurred when man forgot this basic fact that he is only an agent or representative of God, the Lord of the Worlds. He has been given the charge of the world but not its ownership. He has not the right to use the resources found over and within this earth according to his wish or caprice or for the promotion of his limited national, ethnic, tribal or racial benefit, nor for achieving political and personal domination over others. It was the most dangerous moment in human history when humanity began to pursue knowledge along this disastrous course. Only a realization that man is not the Lord or Master of the world but simply a vicegerent and deputy can keep him on the right path. Awareness of this basic fact alone can help him to act as a functionary, lieutenant, or second-in-command instead of an independent owner or master of the world.

It was really a great calamity when knowledge became severed from its relationship with its Bestower. What an appalling spectacle this world presents today! Man has taken over knowledge but the Giver of knowledge has slipped away from his mind! With due apologies to our statesmen, politicians, and intellectuals of the Western world of Europe and America, and those who take pride in its glittering civilization, I would remind them that it was a fatal mistake that man came to consider himself independent and complete owner of this earth. Since man has forgotten his origin, his end and goal in life has also been blurred. I declare with all the sense of responsibility and all the emphasis at my command that man will not be able to set right the affairs of this world unless he recognises that he is simply a creature sent by Someone and unto Him he shall return. He needs to acknowledge that he stands at the one end of the knowledge he possesses today, while God, the Bestower of knowledge, his Creator and Master, is at the other end. If this relationship is broken, man will lose sight of the end and purpose of his creation. This will make our world a battleground of suffering humanity, where countless varieties of servitude, injustice, and debasement of mankind will come into existence.

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